



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 5, 2020

New Operation B.R.A.V.E. Media Campaign Promotes HIV Treatment as Powerful Prevention Tool

SAN ANTONIO, TX – Today, Operation B.R.A.V.E. (Bexar county Response And Victory in ending the Epidemic) announced the launch of “How Low Can You Go?”, an innovative bi-lingual media campaign aimed at promoting HIV treatment as a powerful tool for HIV prevention. When people with HIV take their HIV medications as prescribed, they can keep the amount of HIV in their body so low that it can’t be passed on to others. In clinical terms, this is called viral suppression. The campaign is supported by two websites, GoLowSA.org and BajarSA.org (Spanish), as well as smart phone apps for iOS and Android.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is proven science supporting the campaign. In three different studies, including thousands of couples and many thousand acts of sex without a condom or other HIV prevention method, no HIV transmissions to an HIV-negative partner were observed when the HIV-positive person was virally suppressed.

This is life-changing news for the more than 6,400 people living with HIV in Bexar County. Greg Casillas has been living with HIV for 20 years and virally suppressed since 2018. “When I was diagnosed, taking meds felt like the beginning of the end of my life. It was very difficult for me to accept,” Greg said. “When I learned new HIV meds could help me live a long, normal life, I confronted the internal stigma I had created and started care. Marrying the man of my dreams meant I needed to do it for him too. By taking my meds and staying healthy, I cannot pass HIV to him. It's not a cure for HIV, but it's the next best thing.”

When the amount of HIV in a person’s body is so low that it’s difficult for lab tests measure, it’s referred to as being “undetectable.” It takes commitment for a person to reach this status.

“You need to take your HIV meds every day as prescribed. It can take a few months to several months to get to undetectable status as everyone is different,” said Dr. Roberto Villarreal, Senior Vice President at University Health System. “Once your doctor confirms the amount of HIV in your body is undetectable, you still need to keep taking your meds and going to your medical appointments. The goal is to adhere to your HIV treatment and remain undetectable long-term.”

An estimated 37% of people living with HIV in Bexar County have not been able to reach an undetectable status. This may be due to other health issues, how often they take their meds or

other socioeconomic factors. Operation B.R.A.V.E. has set an ambitious goal of having 90% of persons with HIV in Bexar County achieve a consistent undetectable level of HIV by 2030.

Funding for this initiative is provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), HIV/AIDS Bureau (HAB).

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BACKGROUND

- Taking one or more medications to treat HIV is known as Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART). There's proven science behind the campaign that is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

"When Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) results in viral suppression, defined as less than 200 copies/ml or undetectable levels, it prevents sexual HIV transmission. Across three different studies, including thousands of couples and many thousand acts of sex without a condom or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), no HIV transmissions to an HIV-negative partner were observed when the HIV-positive person was virally suppressed. This means that people who take ART daily as prescribed and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting the virus to an HIV-negative partner." U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), [Dear Colleague Letter](#) (September 2017)

- Page 21 of the [Texas HIV Surveillance Report 2018](#) (the most recent report available) shows that Bexar County had 6,470 people with HIV (prevalence).